

Racism Pictured: Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali's *The Proudest Blue*
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Abstract:

The study argues that through illustrations *The Proudest Blue* tends to write back to the western discourses in terms of veil's representations. The study also remonstrates violence and discrimination against veiled women. It concludes that misperceptions and misconceptions rooted in the West without knowledge of the Islamic perspective induce hatred and hostility. This study aims to arch understanding and promote confabulation between the non –Islamic culture and the Islamic one. Ultimately, this study is paramount as it triggers the critical need for understanding, harmony, and tolerance. This study is assumed to contribute to the analysis of picture books as a kind of literature. The study scrutinizes the picture book as a hybrid literary work that uses pictures and words to conjure up an emotional reaction. The study accentuates the idea that it is necessary to trespass dismissing picture books for the maintenance and development of creativity in the world of literature.

Keywords: Picture, Proud, Racism, Text, Veil.

العنصرية مرسومة: "الأزرق الأكثر فخراً" لإبتهاج محمد و S.K. علي

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الملخص:

تجادل الدراسة بأن من خلال الرسوم التوضيحية، تميل رواية "الأزرق الأكثر فخراً" إلى الرد على الخطابات الغربية فيما يتعلق بتمثيلات الحجاب. تندد الدراسة أيضاً بالعنف والتمييز ضد النساء المحجبات. يخلص إلى أن المفاهيم الخاطئة والمفاهيم المغلوطة المتجذرة في الغرب دون معرفة بالمنظور الإسلامي تؤدي إلى الكراهية والعداء. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعزيز الفهم وتعزيز الحوار بين الثقافة غير الإسلامية والثقافة الإسلامية. في النهاية، هذه الدراسة ذات أهمية قصوى لأنها تثير الحاجة الملحة للفهم والوثام والتسامح. من المفترض أن تساهم هذه الدراسة في تحليل كتب الصور كنوع من الأدب. تقوم الدراسة بتدقيق كتاب الصور كعمل أدبي هجين يستخدم الصور والكلمات لاستحضار رد فعل عاطفي. تؤكد الدراسة على فكرة أنه من الضروري تجاوز تجاهل كتب الصور للحفاظ على الإبداع وتطويره في عالم الأدب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صورة، فخر، عنصرية، نص، حجاب.

Introduction

The relationship between discrimination and religion has been the subject of contentious argument. This is because discrimination and religion are intrinsically linked. Religious intolerance occurs when a party rejects to tolerate the convention, person or conviction on the grounds of religion.

The veil is still one of the most debatable issues in postcolonial arenas. The West continues to persistently distort and malign the veiled Muslim woman. This misrepresentation further weighs Muslim women down and fabricates a fake narrative of their experiences. Furthermore, this falsification of their image can lead to anti-Islam sentiments (Crofts, 2023)

The Proudest Blue bestows Muslim women with the podium to express their accounts rather than have them being dictated by others. *The Proudest Blue* is a response to the muting of “others.” Yet, the book is not to juxtapose occidental culture, but rather to affirm the cogency of the Islamic culture.

The Proudest Blue is a picture book (Wikipedia, 2023). A picture book includes pictures joined with text bubbles. It's a medium the reader delves into the story (Aška, 2022). The core of picture books is creating a zone, where the pictures and words engage in the reader's mind.

Problems of the Study

The problems of the study are as follows:

1. How is religious discrimination against the veiled Asiya depicted in *The Proudest Blue*?
2. How do pictures, colors, and shades contribute to delivering the main theme of the picture book?
3. What is the message behind *The Proudest Blue*?

C. Objectives of the Study

The goals of the study are:

1. To explore the representation of Otherization of the veiled woman in Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali's *The Proudest Blue*.
2. To perceive the implied themes and literary techniques employed by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali to reflect the conflict.
3. To promote for the tolerance and acceptance of others.

Methodology

Using qualitative methodology, the study demonstrates the injustices encountered by Muslim veiled women, including prejudice, aggression, and degradation. The theoretical basis that will be utilized in this study is formulated on semiotics.

Literature Review

Discrimination is defined as the "The behavior of biasing against individuals (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). Since the 9/11 attacks islamophobia has been escalating worldwide (Morgan & Poynting, 2016). As a result of Islamophobia, Muslims suffer from discrimination both in life and written printings.

In the genre of picture books, one can find a quite substantial number of Muslim- acculturated books that write back to the misrepresentation of Muslims. One of these mediums is *The Proudest Blue*. Many sources offer critical written evaluations of *The Proudest Blue*. According to Ali (n.d), *The Proudest Blue* is about misperceptions , misrepresentation, and bullying of Muslims (Ali, n.d). Ibtihaj Muhammad, the author of *The Proudest Blue*, tackles the difficulties of wearing the veil when not everyone is understanding. The author herself was bullied by her classmates after wearing the veil because of the visible presentation of her faith (Eppard, n.d). According to Little (2019), the significance of the story is about hijab as something "special but also normal". According to an article entitled "Behind the book: *The Proudest Blue*" (n.d), the pictures and the colors are as effective as words delivering the message of how to be influential of one's own religion, and how to remain resilient.

Discussion and Results

Reign and control of people no longer demands militaristic suppression; instead, the ability to dominate and guide a worldwide mainstream rhetoric seems to have become more sagacious. According to Foucault (1980), truth and power are intrinsically linked. Each power has its system of truth, its tactics of truth: that is, the kinds of discourse which serves its end means.

The neo-colonialist discourse constructs negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam and consequently displaying them as 'others.' Muslims being integrated into an ideologically uniform crowd, subsequently paralleled to terrorists (Fekete, 2004, p.11). The Western literature has exacerbated the situation by presenting repulsive, clichéd, partisan portrayals of Muslims, so molding public sentiment against Muslims, consequently inducing prejudice racism in society.

Writing back to the Occidental discourse becomes important in the persistence of the hegemonic culture (Said, 1979). Words and pictures have the power to eradicate bigotry and challenge canonical narratives that have gone undisputed for far enough time. *The Proudest Blue* fights back with pictures and words against stereotyped conceptions about Muslim women's veils and identities. *The Proudest Blue* would be entirely uncluttered if it weren't for the cunning nature of racism present in the community. the book explores the racism and prejudice that influences minorities. This is a must-read on religion, racism and identity.

Semiotics is a useful vehicle for elucidating and apprehending a picture book, and its employment can provide illumination into the aesthetic features of picture books. According to Mohd, et al. (2014), the pictorial and lingual elements of texts are equivalently important in picture books. Ferdinand de Saussure (1977) segmented the sign into two constituents: the signifier, which is the tangible or phonic portrayal of the concept or idea, and the signified, which is the idea or significate or antecedent (Mohd, et al., 2014). Peirce's theory of sign concentrates on three elements, namely the sign which is like Saussure's concept of the

signifier, ii) referent which is synonymous with the signified, and iii) interpretant which refers to the meaning (Mohd, et al., 2014) . Interpreting the picture book is double-layered. In this view, the sign is associated with the text which empowers it to imply or signify (Peirce, 1955). In this study, the connotative meanings will be extracted from the pictures, the font, the point of view, and colors.

As the veil has become growingly obvious in primary metropolitan areas, it has also become growingly discriminated against. The image of the veiled Muslim woman conjures up the binary opposition of “us” vs. “them.” Faiza, *The Proudest Blue's* narrator, is thrilled about the first school day. It's also the first day of her sister's wearing the veil. As the day moves forward, Faiza watches as other kids bully against Asiya; one even threatens to snap the veil off her sister's head, calling it a tablecloth (Caroll, n.d).The veil detaches Asiya within from the world without. Many societies place worth on certain characteristics and identities for the benefit of the excluding of others. The book examines the obstinacy of racism, xenophobia, and prejudice in a world where veiled women suffer from the pain of being “others.”

Shadows play an important role in *The Proudest Blue*, adding depth to the story. The racists are illustrated as shadows (Figure 1). The illustrator has skillfully woven their exquisiteness into the texture of book. The illustrator uses the motif of shadows to indicate the camouflage of the truth. The truth that the shadows try to camouflage here is that while Islam is not a race, veiled Muslim women are however racialized. In literature, shadows often serve as a menacing aura, hinting at potential threat (*The Intriguing History of Shadows in Art and Literature*, n.d.). In *The Proudest Blue*, racists are hinted at as malicious, dangerous individuals ambushing out there, ready to devastate any semblance of inclusiveness. By their kind, shadows are evanescent and momentary. Accordingly, the shadows in *The Proudest Blue* indicate a sense of the ephemeral and transient nature of religious racism as it has no strong basis (*ibid.*). The shadows lack individualism and lack distinctive features on their faces because they are portrayed similarly. They all appear to have

been copied. This indicates that biased attitudes prefer homogeneity and rejects heterogeneity.

Figure 1 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.10)

The sky is more than just a huge stretch of blue; it's loaded with



resounding significance in *The Proudest Blue* (Figure 2). In this picture book, we'll ascend into the unbounded sphere of sky symbolism, delving into a plethora of meanings that these picture embody. Being infinite and uncontrollable, the sky symbolizes the emancipative nature of freedom. Just as birds soar up the sky freely, it symbolizes extricating oneself from religious and racial limitations. Like the way the sky expands infinitely, *The Proudest Blue* encourages racists to broaden their standpoints, accept diversification, and espouse the immensity of our multicultural and multiracial existence. The sky, in its grand and infinite magnitude, invites people to embrace and celebrate freedom and effusiveness. The sky is a symbol of wholeness that trespasses the dichotomy of Christian versus Muslim as well as Orient versus Occident. The sky transcends limits and confines. The sky is all-inclusive and doesn't segregate. This inspires children be more all-encompassing and tolerant of the multiplicity of religions, cultures, and races. The sky tolerates and holds up the fluctuating weather conditions. This is a call for children to be resilient in the face of racism and discrimination.



Figure 2 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.5)

Colors also play a significant role in *The Proudest Blue*. The illustrator has used different colors to produce different conjunctions for each character. For example, Faiza is irradiated with light as she spins in front of trees (Figure 3). The sky and nature indicate the lively, jocular, optimistic spirit of the young. As Faiza moves into moments of anxiety once they're encountered with some racist attitudes, colors change. The illustrations enhance those moments with kind of murky colors and more cramped spaces, but there is always a come back to the color blue of the sky metaphor and the lighter colors.



Figure 3 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.2)

Skin color is associated with denoted significances. Skin color is the main characteristic to which other cultural intolerances are entwined with. Asiya and Faiza's skin color is brown (Figure 4). The book accentuates the fact that the politics of racial discrimination overlap with that of the religious discrimination. It lays down that the former lurks behind the latter. The Occidental culture still believes that skin color assesses a person's value. In the occidental culture, all merits are associated with the white skin while darker skins have pejorative implications.



Figure 4 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.3)

Faiza has a brown skin, her schoolfellow has reddish hair and green eyes, and their teacher has bronzed complexion and brown hair (Figure 5). There is so much heterogeneity in that illustration. Each person has a sense of singularity and identity. However, their presence in one picture is a call for multiculturalism.



Figure 5 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.7)

The Point-of-view is one of the semiotics techniques that enables the reader to look through the viewpoint of one of the characters in the picture book. *The Proudest Blue* makes use of different kinds of point of view. The use of multiple points of view allows the author to show different perspectives on the issue of racism. By using a multitude of perspectives, the author and illustrator create a spirited and intriguing visual experience for readers that provoke a wide array of emotions.

One of the viewpoints used in picture books is the ideological one. The ideological point of view includes the different beliefs and values a person believes in, as well as the classifications by which (s)he classifies people (Khafaga, 2022). Ideological racism includes the extent of discrimination regarding the social and cultural practices of society. In Figure 6, the shadows take an ideological point of view while looking and pointing at Asiya. In the following picture, the discrimination against Asiyah is ideologically driven which takes the form of verbal, behavioral, or psychological indignities.



Figure 6 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.7)

The spatial point of view refers to the standpoint taken by the narrator of a story (Fowler , 1996). The low-angle view in the following picture indicates that Faiza feels intimidated and inferior as she is looking up at the characters (Figure 7).



Figure 7 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.13)

The psychological point of view refers to the characters' feelings and psychological condition (Fowler, 1996). According to Iford (2023), a group of psychological reactions is displayed through different countenances of Faiza's face in the pictures, from merriment (Figure 8), admiration (Figure 9), worry (Figure 10), fury (Figure 11) and terror (Figure 12).



Figure 8 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.10)



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

(Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.6) (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.10)
(Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.13)

The temporal point of view concentrates on how relations between characters or events are displayed and organized within the narrative frame. The recurrent mentions Faizah makes to the number of steps she takes seems to reflect the points between her moments of anxiety and condolence of power and resilience. The picture also indicates that discrimination creates a social distance between the racists and the victims (Figure 13).

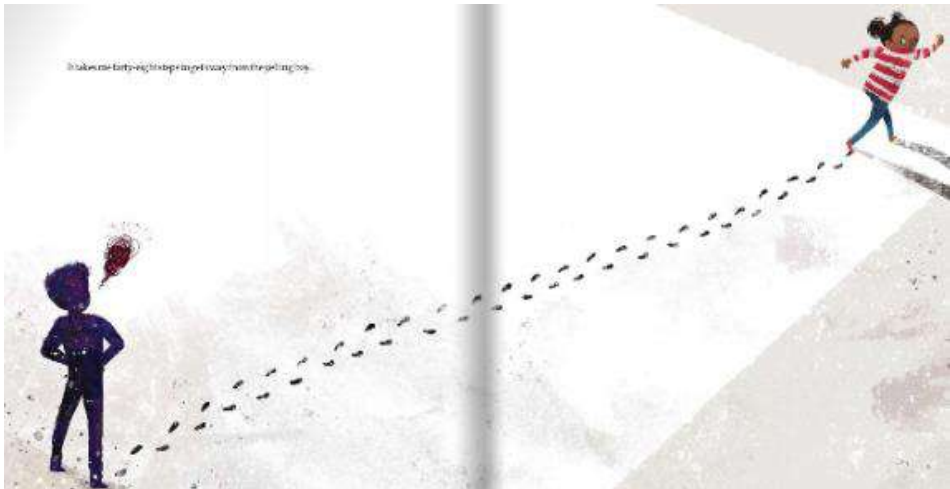


Figure 13 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p: 12)

Asiya's veil is a way of confirming her cultural identity. Asiya's face in the following illustration just moves forward (Figure 14). Asiya is confident about who she is, what she represents. Being resilient is to not have to look for endorsement from others but to revere, esteem, and uplift oneself despite wording from the outside world. The veil appears as a paramount idiosyncrasy of Muslim women's identities. The veil is an indicator of the difference of Muslim women. The veil signals Asiyah's individuality. Asiyah gains a different configuration and a self by putting on the veil. The veil makes Asiyah's homogenized appearance change into unorthodox self.

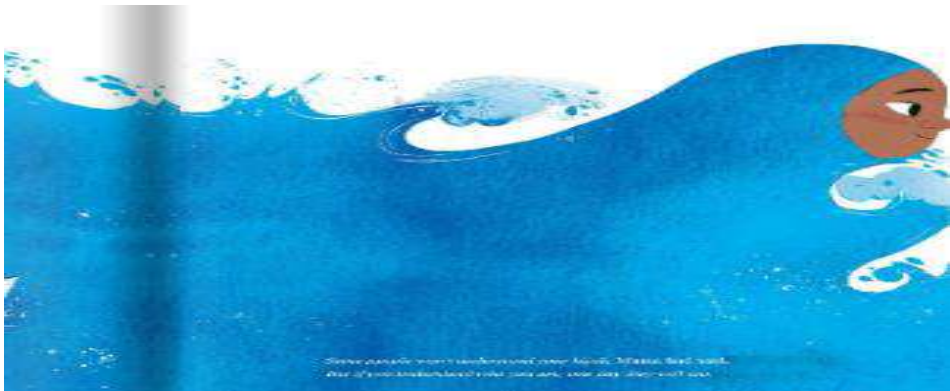


Figure 14 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.8)

Typography is used to provoke a sense of atmosphere and mood. Font change is significant in *The Proudest Blue*. In the following illustration (Figure 15), the font is uneven and italicized in the middle but by the beginning and the end of the last sentence sentence, the words are more even: '...special *and* normal.' The italicized "and" indicates emphasis. Asiya's veil is special like the sky but also its color is regular as the sky is always there. This delivers the main theme of the picture book, which is what is considered weird by one culture, may be considered normal and special by another culture.

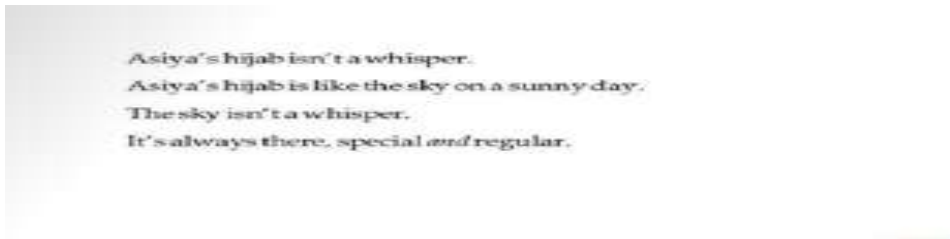


Figure 15 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019:p.5)

'We're sisters.' 'Asiya knows it. I know it' reflects the poised, symmetrical harm solidarity of the two sisters. Both sentences are equitable with three words each and are positioned on the same line, and the last sentence 'We're sisters.' functions to accentuate the strength of their relationship.

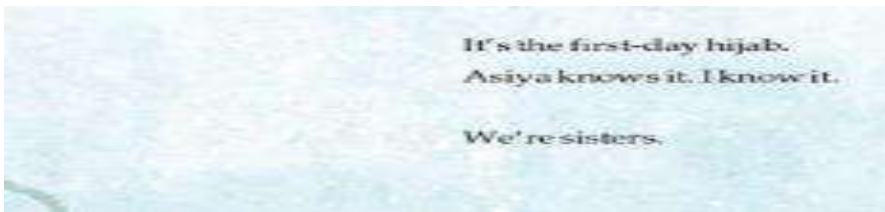


Figure 16 (Muhammad & Aly, 2019: p.1)

The verbal text of *The Proudest Blue* consists of monologues and dialogue. The dialogue is frequently direct, which helps to accentuate the momentousness of the subject. This monologue helps to reveal the sense of melancholy and fear that Faiza has experienced.

Conclusion

Tolerance radiates by the acceptance of other religious. Religious discrimination is used for legal and political uses. The study concludes with an invitation for intercultural religious tolerance that promises a channel to vanquish the perfidious obstinacy of racism. Such a way ahead, however, requires a de-centering of only one religion in favor of an

epistemological perception which gives full consideration to the practitioners of different religions.

Islām orientates us that we live in unanimity and peace with people of different religions, including Jews , Christians, and others. Islām is a religion of peacefulness that opposes any kind of tyranny and prejudice. Tolerance is very crucial in a multi-cultural society in order for there to be harmony, dialogue and empathy.

The Proudest Blue is an astoundingly gripping example of the tribulation of racism. The continuous racism against people from different races and religions is an example of how racial discrimination and religious intolerance can interweave. *The Proudest Blue* challenges the ways that the West often mythologized or criticized the veil, and has presented antithetical images: artwork that portrays how we envision our culture and our religion. Art is a global language. language is communication of ideas and feelings through a system of random signs; this allows art to fit within the umbrella of literature. Messages about the elimination of racism need to have a strong influence. This strong influence is achieved when art is conjugated with the written word.

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